

# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

April 1997

## Director's Perspective

### HR Issues for 1997 and Beyond

It's spring, and this season of renewal signals the time for renewed attention to the state of human resources management (HRM) in the Federal Government. As Federal agencies continue to downsize their personnel staffs at a faster rate than the rest of the workforce, the challenges of good workforce management increase. Congress again will consider various legislative initiatives intended to improve HRM in the executive branch, and Federal managers will continue the struggle to balance short-term pressures with the longer range perspective that is essential to good management. In that context, here are four emerging issues that deserve attention in 1997:

■ **HRM leadership.** The role of OPM has undergone a significant transformation as it has downsized by almost half in the last four years while OMB, the NPR, and Congress have all sought to exert constructive influence on the future of the Federal civil service. Individual Federal agencies, on the other hand, are necessarily focused inward as they try to adapt to the increased delegation and decentralization of many HR functions. Given the evolving roles of these various players in the HR arena, are changes needed in the manner in which overall leadership for Federal HRM is being provided?

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### OPE Focus on the Facts

#### *Belief:*

As a result of the Government's downsizing efforts, there remain relatively few Federal employees eligible for retirement.

#### **Fact:**

As of September 1996, the number of retirement-eligible employees remains substantial. In fact, the pool of employees eligible for retirement approaches 25 percent of the permanent workforce—some 9.24 percent are eligible for regular retirement and another 15.4 percent are eligible for early retirement.

Source: OPM, Central Personnel Data File

### Downsizing Seen As Detrimental to Personnel Operations

In its effort to create a Government that works better and costs less, the National Performance Review recommended that agencies streamline their operations by reducing the resources they spend on administrative support functions such as human resources. To learn about the extent to which downsizing actually has occurred in this area and the effect it has had on agency operations, we asked respondents to an MSPB survey of Federal supervisors and managers about reductions in the size of their personnel offices.

What we found seems to indicate that while downsizing is indeed happening in administrative support functions, these reductions have been accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the level and quality of

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## Director's Perspective (continued)

■ **Measuring HRM results.** Federal agency HRM staffs must be ready to demonstrate that they provide a “value added” service with regard to accomplishing their agencies’ missions. At the same time, they must demonstrate that they can effectively balance the intangibles of public policy with a merit-based civil service, for example, integrating the President’s “welfare to work” initiative into agency workforce planning. What measures, therefore, best capture the accomplishments of HRM staffs given their multiple roles and the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act?

■ **Strategic recruiting and succession planning.** In spite of—and also because of—the downsizing of the

Federal workforce, it’s becoming even more important to focus on our ability to hire talented people and to prepare those already in the workforce for advancement into those particularly critical positions that need to be filled by the very best and brightest. How are agencies getting people into the pipeline to fill those positions in the next five, ten, twenty years?

■ **Supervisors, managers, and values.** Effective leadership and skillful interpersonal relations are crucial attributes for Federal supervisors and managers if they are to develop, retain, and motivate highly qualified employees. Further, an essential characteristic of an effective public service is a common set of values with regard to fairness, equity, and merit. Thus, supervisors and managers must not only personally embrace the values articu-

lated in the merit system principles, but they also must be able to instill them in others. How should the Government select and develop supervisors and managers who have the appropriate values and can foster them in others? And how can we best hold these managers and their agencies accountable for adherence to the values of a merit-based civil service?

How these issues are addressed will greatly affect the ability of the Federal Government to effectively and efficiently carry out its many missions on behalf of the American public. This is also the reason that these issues will be at the core of much of the Governmentwide studies and oversight work carried out by MSPB’s Office of Policy and Evaluation in the months ahead.

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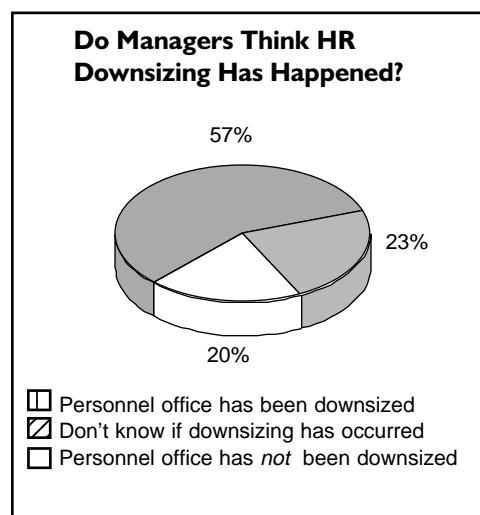
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## Personnel Downsizing (continued from page 1)

support available to Federal managers.

As shown in the chart on the next page, 57 percent of the Federal supervisors and managers surveyed said that their personnel offices had indeed been downsized. Another 23 percent didn’t know whether downsizing had occurred and only 20 percent believed that there had been no decrease in

the number of people working in personnel. Since downsizing has clearly occurred in many



organizations, the important question is whether it has improved operations or at least avoided making things worse.

Unfortunately, many managers believe that the staff cuts have had a detrimental effect on the service they receive from their personnel offices. In organizations where the personnel offices have been downsized, 60 percent of the supervisors believe that the speed of processing actions has declined. Another 17 percent said that although things had not gotten worse they had been too slow to begin with. Only 3 percent think that actions are being processed more quickly as a result of downsizing.

In a similar finding, 55 percent of the supervisors told us that there are fewer people available to assist them on personnel issues. Overall, less than 40 percent said that there were now enough people available to help them do their jobs.

When we asked supervisors about the effect of personnel

staff cuts on the quality of the assistance they received, once again we found that many supervisors believe that the effect has generally been negative. Almost 40 percent said that quality had gotten worse. On the plus side, 5 percent said that the quality of their servicing had actually improved as the result of downsizing, while 49 percent said that the quality of the assistance they received had not declined and was at least acceptable to begin with.

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## Standing Panels Provide Views from the Front Line

Late in 1996 the Board's Office of Policy and Evaluation established two standing panels to provide insight into how changes in human resources management are affecting their agencies. The two panels—one, a group of line managers and supervisors and the other, HRM specialists—are employed by 37 Federal departments and independent agencies. We're now putting together a third panel whose members will be affiliated with the ten Federal unions with national consultation rights.

We recently asked the existing panels about certain aspects of Federal staffing, including whether managers and supervisors believe they have gained more staffing authority in the past three years. We received responses from

around 1500 individuals from each of the panels.

While the responses of our panel members are not statistically representative of the whole Government, their responses suggest that three years after the National Performance Review advocated greater delegation of HRM authority to line officials, some agencies have not achieved that goal. Further, many line officials—whether or not agencies actually have delegated the authority to them—believe that the amount of staffing authority they are allowed to exercise remains unchanged. We are continuing to examine this issue and plan soon to publish additional panel results as well as more information about the delegation of personnel authority as it coincides with the reduction in the number of managers and supervisors.

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## More on Developing Surveys

In the years that MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation has been using surveys to gather information about Federal HR issues, we have learned a great deal about the do's and don'ts of survey development and administration. In the December 1996 *Issues of Merit*, we offered some advice about the points to consider before you do your own survey. Here, as promised, are some general guidelines about writing survey questions.

1. State the questions as simply as possible. The more complex the wording, the more

easily the respondent can become confused or misinterpret what you're asking.

2. Ask only what you really need to know from the respondent. If a question is really interesting, but not directly related to topic(s) you're investigating, curb your curiosity. Don't ask. And don't waste the respondents' time by asking questions about information that you can obtain from another source.

3. If your survey is long (more than one page), break the questions into sections, and give the respondents transitions (headings or phrasing) to orient them to each section.

4. If you have items that are to be answered only by a particular subgroup of the respondents (e.g., questions pertaining only to supervisors), be sure you have clearly defined who should answer the questions. Be clear about where the respondents who are not supposed to answer those items can find the next items they *are* supposed to answer.

5. Avoid double-barreled questions—items that seem to ask one question but actually ask two or more. For example, "Do you have longer and more complicated assignments since the downsizing?" is doubled-barreled because it's asking about both quantity and quality of work, and the respondent may have a different answer for each factor.

6. Don't lead the respondent to a particular response. Leading questions are those that give the respondent some clue about what the questioner is expecting to hear, and thus may bias the respondent's answers.

7. Make sure that you have provided response categories for all the possible answers that respondents might give to a particular question. "Other," "don't know," and "does not apply to me" are often useful for ensuring that there's an answer for every respondent. Also, be sure your response categories don't overlap (unless you are going to give respondents the option of marking or answering "yes" to all the choices that apply). Nothing is more frustrating to respondents than trying to choose between two answers that seem to fit equally well, or finding nothing among the choices that describes their own situation.

8. Make your response scale categories as specific as possible, because respondents interpret qualifying words and phrases differently. Phrases like "a lot" or "frequently" or "not very" need to be supplemented with specific information or examples to help the respondent understand exactly what you intended those words to mean. For example, when asking how much time employ-

ees spent on a task, instead of using the phrase "a lot" as a response scale category, use a phrase such as "A lot—at least 10 hours per week."

Finally, we always advise that you pilot test questionnaires on a group (or groups) of individuals who are representative of the population you want to survey. For example, if you want your entire workforce to fill out the survey, and you intend to compare responses by grade level and occupation, you should administer the survey to a test group that includes people in those grade levels and occupations. (You can run several testing sessions to fit everybody in.)

In pilot testing surveys, we typically ask the participants to fill out a clean draft of the questionnaire (and even though we use a draft, we try to make the layout of questions and response scales look as much like the final printed version as possible, so that we can determine whether respondents had any difficulty using the response scales or following the instructions). After participants have completed the draft questionnaire, we go through the survey with them, discussing each item, listening to their comments about issues such as clarity, sensitivity of wording, alternate meaning of questions, etc. And, of course, we consider the test groups' comments very carefully and modify the questionnaire accordingly.

Once you've completed these steps, you should be ready to administer your survey. Presumably you've decided how the surveys will be delivered to participants—by the Postal

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## Need Help?

**The Board's Office of Policy and Evaluation may be available to assist you, on a reimbursable basis, to design survey instruments, develop sampling plans, and conduct surveys. Contact us for more information (202) 653-6772, extension 1339**



Service, through interoffice mail, electronically—and you know where respondents will be sending the completed questionnaires and how the data will be tabulated. As we've said previously, it's this planning and up-front effort that are so critical to good survey work. Taking the time to plan what you need to ask, who you need to ask, and how you need to ask it is the best way to get the information you need from your survey.

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## World Without FPM

**I**t's been nearly four years since the director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management ceremoniously deposited a cartful of papers into a trash dumpster to signal the end of the Federal Personnel Manual. This highly symbolic gesture was meant to show that Government managers were being freed from the red tape and burdensome regulations that the FPM had come to represent. What effect has the elimination of this mass of regulations, guidance, forms, and instructions had on the Federal managers and human resources workers who for years were variously hindered or helped by the FPM?

We sought views on this subject from a cross section of managers and personnel specialists in several focus groups assembled for this purpose. What we found was a mixed verdict, both with regard to

whether or not agencies are really operating without FPM or FPM-inspired guidance and also with regard to how satisfied the former users of the FPM are with its elimination.

As it happens, the world is not totally without the guidance the FPM provided. A considerable amount of FPM material was reborn in the form of manuals and handbooks. There was never any doubt that much of this material was useful, whatever its manner of presentation; in many cases the material is indispensable to the orderly functioning of human resources operations. The Government *needs* to handle life insurance, health benefits, retirement, and payroll actions consistently. Agencies *need* to collect and report personnel data to OPM (or some central recordkeeper) in a uniform fashion. Guidance in these areas, formerly found in a number of FPM supplements, has not been eliminated, but transformed into other, topic-specific publications.

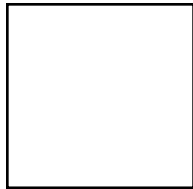
In many other areas of human resources, however, the FPM is gone and personnelists and managers now refer to title 5 of the Code of Federal Regulations and the civil service laws themselves. This fact gives agencies more flexibility in areas such as staffing and performance management, since the legal requirements are often less restrictive than the former FPM guidance. But this flexibility is lost if agencies impose unnecessary restrictions on themselves through their own manuals and requirements that parallel or repeat the FPM. According to managers and human resources

people we talked to, not many agencies have taken on major initiatives to review, reduce, and/or eliminate outdated or unnecessary internal personnel directives.

There are several reasons for the lack of movement to reduce internal agency restrictions. For some organizations, a reported lack of interest and commitment from top management prevents this issue from being given the attention needed to spur action. Some agencies are reluctant to let their managers and human resources operations staffs interpret laws and regulations on their own. And some organizations that have felt the effect of the National Performance Review's emphasis on reducing administrative staff do not believe they have people available to take on new initiatives such as a major project to reduce internal agency regulations.

Do the people affected by the elimination of the FPM generally favor the change? Again, opinions vary. We found that some HR practitioners were indifferent, while some seriously question OPM's decision. Others had more specific reservations: "Am I supposed to go to the manager and say 'Here are the regulations; here is title 5'? These materials are useless to the average manager." This last reaction is particularly significant given a growing expectation that managers and supervisors will handle more personnel responsibilities as HR jobs continue to be eliminated. Clearly, more work is needed to adapt to and take advantage of a world without the FPM.

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